

Joe Patten, a Theater Caretaker Known As the Phantom of the Fox, Dies at 89

By MARGALIT FOX

They called him the Phantom — the Phantom of the Fox.

Like his well-known Parisian counterpart, he lived for decades in an ornate metropolitan theater. He had intimate knowledge of every light, every rope, every walkway and every catacomb in his cavernous Eden.

But unlike the storied figure said to haunt the Paris Opera, this Phantom was real — an ardent, somewhat solitary, supremely gifted man named Joe Patten. Until shortly before his death on April 7, at 89, Mr. Patten had lived in rococo splendor in a sprawling private apartment in Atlanta's historic Fox Theater.

Over the course of his long love affair with the Fox, Mr. Patten, its technical director from 1974 until his retirement in 2001, became as revered a fixture of the city's cultural life as the theater itself. He restored its magnificent pipe organ to long-lost glory and twice saved the entire building — from demolition in the 1970s and from fire in the 1990s.

But in the end, Mr. Patten was forced to wage his greatest preservation campaign on his own behalf: In old age, in a development that may properly be called Oedipal, he battled eviction at the hands of the very theater he had nurtured for so long.

The Fox, built in the 1920s as a Shriners' temple, outlavishes the most lavish American movie palace imaginable — a sultan's fever dream in the middle of Midtown Atlanta.

Designed principally by the French-born architect Ollivier J. Vinour, it is a quarter-million-square-foot profusion of domes, turrets, minarets, Moorish archways, Oriental carpets, lush draperies, Egyptian bas-relief, trompe l'oeil paintings, fountains, elaborate lighting fixtures, stained glass, gold leaf, tile and gracious banisters, which Mr. Patten, in the dead of night, would occasionally slide down for the sheer joy of it. Above its more than 4,000 seats, an ultramarine ceiling twinkles

with crystal stars.

By the time the building opened, on Christmas Day 1929, the stock market crash had made it a prohibitive prospect for the Shriners, and it began life as a home to talking pictures.

The Fox was named a national historic landmark in 1976, partly as a result of Mr. Patten's efforts. Today, it is used for movies; live events like music, dance and touring Broadway shows; and conventions.

The theater's centerpiece is its vast pipe organ, made by the eminent Danish-born organ builder M. P. Möller. With four keyboards and 3,622 pipes — some more than 30 feet high — it is one of the largest theater organs in the world. "Mighty Mo," Atlantans fondly call it.

It was the organ that had first drawn Mr. Patten to the Fox, and

Stopping an eviction attempt became a cause célèbre.

for more than 35 years, he inhabited an antique-filled 3,640-square-foot duplex apartment beneath its dome, reached by climbing a cinematically appropriate 39 steps from a private entrance on Ponce de León Avenue.

"They call me Phantom of the Fox because I know the building so well," he told *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* in 2007. "I'm able to get from one point to another through all sorts of avenues."

He wanted nothing more, his associates said this week, than to leave the Fox feet first, dying in the theater as if in the fond embrace of a spouse. His health precluded that, but he managed to hang on there almost that long.

Joe Griffin Patten was born on Feb. 9, 1927, in Lakeland, Fla. As a boy, he became enraptured by the pipe organ at his church and watched keenly whenever the re-

pairman came to work on it. At 12, he became the repairman's apprentice.

After Navy service stateside in World War II, Mr. Patten embarked on a career installing X-ray equipment for some of the country's biggest hospitals. Visiting Atlanta in the mid-1940s, he was smitten by the Fox and, in particular, by Mighty Mo. He moved to the city in the early 1960s.

By then, the organ was unplayable, having fallen, like the theater itself, into deep disrepair. In 1963, working as a volunteer, Mr. Patten undertook its restoration.

"He had to perform radical surgery," Robert Foreman, a longtime friend, said in an interview on Monday. "Everyone else had given up."

In saving the organ, Mr. Foreman said, Mr. Patten realized that he ought to save the theater — then slated for the wrecking ball — along with it. In 1974, he helped found Atlanta Landmarks, a nonprofit organization that oversaw the acquisition and multimillion-dollar restoration of the Fox.

That year, Mr. Patten formally joined the staff of the theater, spending 80 hours a week tending to its needs and to those of visiting artists.

On one occasion, he helped the Rolling Stones give fans the slip by ushering them out a side door and into an ambulance. On another, he gave a car-mad young comic named Jay Leno a ride in his 1937 Rolls-Royce — fittingly, a Phantom III — one of some half-dozen classic automobiles to which Mr. Patten ministered tenderly to the end of his life.

In December 1979, in recompense for having saved the Fox, Atlanta Landmarks awarded Mr. Patten lifetime tenancy of its upper floors. He painstakingly renovated the space, then a derelict storage area, at his own expense — about \$100,000, Mr. Foreman said.

Mr. Patten rescued the Fox again in 1996, after a predawn electrical fire broke out. His profound knowledge of the theater's anatomy, which let him direct firefighters to precisely the right spot from which to attack the flames, was widely credited with having saved the place from burning to the ground.

But in 2010, as his health began to decline, Atlanta Landmarks tried to ease Mr. Patten out of the theater.

That year, after he returned from a hospital stay, the organization sent him a letter "asking him to seek out an 'assisted-living residence,'" *The Journal-Constitution* reported.

Among the concerns the organization expressed was that theater employees would be obliged increasingly to check on Mr. Patten.

"To burden the staff with this future expectation cannot be presumed or continued, as it is both unfair to them and affects the Theater's operations," the letter said.

Mr. Patten, after receiving the letter, told *The Journal-Constitu-*



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Joe Patten in 2010. He was the technical director of Atlanta's Fox Theater from 1974 to 2001.

tion, "The whole feeling I get is that they don't want me here."

The eviction attempt became an Atlanta cause célèbre, with members of the public picketing the Fox in support of Mr. Patten.

Mr. Patten, then in his mid-80s, sued for the right to stay in his apartment. Under the terms of a settlement in 2011, he was allowed to do so, and there he remained

until 10 days before he died.

His death, at an Atlanta hospital, was confirmed by a nephew, Greg Patterson. A sister, Patti Patten-Carlen, is Mr. Patten's only immediate survivor.

The fate of Mr. Patten's apartment is unknown, Mr. Foreman said.

From time to time over the years, Mr. Patten would enter a

clandestine passageway in his bedroom and emerge at the foot of a stairway that led to the theater's topmost balcony. There, under the starry blue ceiling, he could watch the onstage drama unfold.

Of all the shows to play the Fox, Mr. Patten said, his favorite was a certain Andrew Lloyd Webber musical — the one with the organ and the big chandelier.

The Fox Theater in 1971. The Fox, built in 1929, was a profusion of Moorish archways, Oriental carpets and graceful banisters, which Mr. Patten, in the dead of night, would occasionally slide down. He saved the building from demolition in the 1970s and from fire in the 1990s.



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